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THE UNITED STATES NAVY UNDER THE NEW CONDITIONS OF NATIONAL LIFE.

BY ADMIRAL P. H. COLOMB, R. N.

No one without a personal interest in the issue of the struggle could have anticipated with more pain the approach of collision between the peoples of the United States and of Spain than I did. No one could have more earnestly desired, up to the last minute, that some way, other than the clash of arms, might have been found to lead out of the difficulty. I was very sorry for Spain. But I am bound to say that I was very sorry for the United States, too. There never was any question about her winning, though I did not anticipate so entire and hopeless a collapse as Spain developed. But the thought that was constantly in my mind, and over and over again found expression in words, was that the United States could never come out of the war as she went into it. She was about to feel, for the first time in her history, her real position in the world. Up to the outbreak of the war, she had always been able to assert herself in reliance upon her mass and weight, and her prospective rather than her real power. When, at rare intervals, she took her place in the councils of the nations, she was, as it may be said, self-contained. She so little dreamed of making sacrifices corresponding to the position she assumed, that she drew a great kingdom's revenue from the pockets of her people, to re-distribute it in the form of pensions to the enormous number of those, and of the successors of those, who had sacrificed themselves for her in the days gone by. In rewards to those she spent as much as Great Britain, not long ago, spent on her whole army and navy, pensions included. The accounts showed disbursements in 1897, in this behalf, of more than one

hundred and forty-one millions of dollars, when the sum allowed for the maintenance of the army was only somewhat over twenty-three millions of dollars, and of the navy only thirty and a half millions of dollars.

To be able to do these wonderful things was the result of self-containedness, and a real isolation. In many ways, perhaps in most ways, the condition was a happier one than can ever again show itself. Yet it was inevitable that the aspirations to which Mahan has given such eloquent voice in his essays, should at some time or other take active form. I am not at all sure that the words of this prophet have not, as ever of old, hastened the fulfillment of the prophecy. But I remember expressing my hopes to him, on the publication of his first great book, that his countrymen might long delay taking to heart the teaching he enforced.

But now that peace is close at hand, the end is that the United States is for the first time giving hostages to fortune, and taking a place in the world that will entail on her sacrifices and difficulties of which she has not yet dreamed. It is impossible to foresee what violent changes in the character and polity of her great Republic must come about before she can submit calmly and resignedly to those sacrifices which Great Britain has often kicked against, and which are to the nations of Continental Europe an almost intolerable burden.

So long as the Empire of the United States of America was contained in a ring fence of land and sea frontiers, she had, in all international disputes, the enormous advantage of unattackableness. No one could get at her from the outside with any hope of success. It was even impossible to apply to her the anaconda policy which was death to the Confederate States alone. She laughed at the idea of blockade, for the power which more than any other might be able to apply such a method of coercion, would, in applying it, wound herself more deeply than it was possible to wound her adversary. But with outlying territories, especially islands, a comparatively weak power has facilities for wounding her without being wounded in return which did not hitherto exist. Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the other islands in the Antilles which Spain is to cede; the island in the Ladrões, and such parts of the Philippines as may in the end pass to the United States, cannot in any case be held by her if she goes to war with

a country possessing a superior navy to her own. If she will accept the sacrifice of charging herself with the maintenance of a predominant navy, then these new possessions will have brought her additional strength, additional power of enforcing her views among the nations of the earth. But the military strength will come from the navy which is resolute and able to retain possession of the islands, not from the islands themselves, which the navy protects. But if this predominant navy is not maintained, the islands can only be sources of strategical weakness; putting a check on the aspirations to influence international councils, which we must certainly expect to see increased, and making the voice of the United States more hesitating, because of the ease with which her island possessions may be rent from her, and her consciousness of the fact. Had Spain possessed the predominant navy, the United States could never have contemplated, still less have succeeded in, her attack upon Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. In like manner, it will be hopeless for the United States to dream of retaining her new possessions in a war with a country which has a navy superior to her own. There is no plainer doctrine than that of the predominant navy, yet there is none which is less easily assimilated by statesmen; while even the highest authorities on such a point may fail to accept the doctrine in its fullness, in which way alone can there be a practical use in it. There is a natural hesitation in pushing such things to their extreme point, and yet I fear they must be so pushed, or let alone.

Thus Mahan in his powerful and stirring essay on "Hawaii and Our Future Sea Power," which is the keynote of the thoughts that fill "The Interest of America in Sea Power," writes with entire truth up to a certain point, and yet hesitates to accept the inevitable consequences. After setting out the aspirations for outlying sea-girt territory, which are at the moment spreading so widely among the nations, and after contemplating their consummation by the United States, he says:

"There is, however, one caution to be given from the military point of view, beyond the need of which the world has not yet passed. Military positions, fortified posts, by land or by sea, however strong or admirably situated, do not confer control by themselves alone. People often say that such an island or harbor will give control of such a body of water. It is an utter, deplorable, ruinous mistake. The phrase, indeed, may be used by some only loosely, without forgetting other implied conditions of adequate protection and adequate navies; but the confidence of our own nation in its native strength, and its indifference to the defense of its ports and the suffi-

ciency of its fleet, give reason to fear that the full consequences of a forward step may not be weighed soberly. Napoleon, who knew better, once talked in this way. 'The islands of San Pietro, Corfu and Malta,' he wrote, 'will make us masters of the whole Mediterranean.' Vain boast! Within one year Corfu, in two years Malta, were rent away from the State that could not support them by its ships. Nay, more; had Bonaparte not taken the latter stronghold out of the hands of its degenerate but innocuous government, that Citadel of the Mediterranean would perhaps—would probably—never have passed into those of his chief enemy. There is here also a lesson for us."

No language could more accurately express the reality of the case. It is impossible for a power with an inferior fleet to retain its island possessions in war if they are attacked by the power possessing the superior fleet. And that is a proposition not limited by geographical conditions. It was the power geographically near to Malta that lost it; it was the power geographically far from Malta that took it and held it. And the case is in no way changed by the transference of sea power from the agency of the wind to the agency of coal consumption. The Spanish difficulty from first to last was the want of a superior fleet. Cervera's coal-ing troubles only existed for a force which dared not openly meet the enemy. Distant operations only differ in degree to operations near at hand, when the superior fleet is concerned. The only real hindrance in such a case would be where there was no sheltered water in the vicinity of his objective unprotected by works so strong that it could not be possessed but after long siege. The new territories or appendages of the United States nowhere possess this advantage in defence, and it is impossible to doubt that if any of them are hereafter attacked by a power with a superior fleet they will fall. Not so rapidly or so easily as they have now fallen, but quite as certainly.

But Mahan feels the difficulty of facing the full import of the doctrine he has laid down. He would be glad to be quit of it if he could. But he can only escape by contending—in effect—that the position of the United States, in possession of a moderate navy, may stave off war. He cannot, I think, mean that if war were declared, an inferior navy could save Hawaii if it were attacked; nor can he, I consider, fully mean that Hawaii would not be attacked. But, in any case, it is not maintainable that Cuba and Puerto Rico would be secure against either attack or capture by a European power having a superior navy at the outbreak of the war, because the United States, with the inferior navy, is nearer

to those islands geographically. The leading authority on all these questions continues:

"It is by no means logical to leap from this recognition of the necessity of adequate naval force to secure outlying dependencies, to the conclusion that the United States would need for that object a navy equal to the largest now existing. A nation as far removed as is our own from the bases of foreign naval strength may reasonably reckon upon the qualification that distance—not to speak of the complex European interests close at hand—impresses upon the exertion of naval strength by European powers. The mistake is when remoteness, unsupported by carefully calculated force, is regarded as an armour of proof, under which any amount of swagger may be indulged in safely."

This view passes clearly from the strategical point, at which the first position was sketched, to the administrative and political. It is without question proper to change the point of view, but the new empire must not mistake the one for the other, or it will waste itself without avail. It might unquestionably be that a European power at war with the United States would be greatly hampered by the political necessity of retaining naval force in her own waters in observation, as it were, of the results of political changes in Europe, and might therefore be unable to face with undoubted superiority the naval forces which the United States, with but a moderate navy, might be able to detach for the defence of her new possessions or appendages in the Pacific, the West Indies, or the Eastern Seas. I scarcely think it can be doubted that Mahan's view in this matter will be the one which the Government of the United States will strive to adopt and preserve.

But will not the feeling among the people of the States be ultimately that which has for some years prevailed in the United Kingdom? Not so many years ago the average Englishman proposed to save his pocket, while he left it doubtful whether an attack by France alone might not rend his empire in pieces. Now, spasms of alarm seize us from the moment it is hinted that Russia and France together might find us only on an equality with them in the matter of naval force. It is becoming not uncommon to urge that we ought to be superior to any three naval powers, and I see at present nothing to bar a continued increase of naval expenditure but an instinctive outcry against the burden of taxation. It may be long before that burden will be really felt in the United Kingdom by those who express the public thought and raise the public voice because of the incidence of taxation. The burden is borne by those who are supposed to be

most able to bear it, and otherwise the general taxation is light. In this way the two hundred and twenty millions or so of dollars that go to defensive forces is as yet not felt, and the public voice is all in favor of still larger expenditure. How it will be in the United States it may not be so easy to say, but I feel convinced that it will be impossible to merge the strategical into the political situation, and that if the Administration should endeavor to use the latter in an argument to limit expenditure, the nakedness of outlying territories which have not a predominant navy ready to support them is likely to be more and more felt by all those sections of the people who are less financially pressed by increased expenditure, and that a great navy, maintained by great sacrifices, will be the result.

It has again been so plainly manifested that a nation with a preponderating navy is like a one-armed man, unless there be a considerable army behind it, that we cannot suppose that there will be contentment unless this end also is achieved. The military, or the warlike, spirit grows by what it feeds on, and a very large, perhaps an enormous, expenditure on what is neither army nor navy, will follow. And it will do so in spite of reason. The acquirement of outlying dependencies is a challenge to the world, and as it is felt to be such, so will the idea of defenceless coasts magnify itself. To onlookers the money spent upon the local defence of the United States coast ports seemed to be wasted in the Spanish war. The fact that there are increases in the power of the land and sea forces, and that therefore every port and every stretch of coast is thereby better protected, has in the British Empire an effect which denies reason. We cannot increase the expenditure upon the general defence of the Empire without stimulating the national thought to demand even greater increases in the local defence, and the greatest flaws in the chain of reasoning put forward to back the demand have little effect in checking the supply.

I do not think the administrative prudence which Mahan counsels will in the end make itself felt so much as the unreflecting claim for all kinds of expenditure, which can by any verbal process be twisted into the form of a defensive object. I fear, therefore, that between the certain fact that the new dependencies can only be retained by a predominant navy; the administrative endeavor to curtail an expenditure that it will be difficult

to meet; and the general turning of the public mind to military problems, and the alarm that surely accompanies such study; there is likely to be a great expenditure with but little apprehension of the real strategical position; so that there may come trouble, contention, waste of energy, and yet little real advance in strength.

But if it could be that there were a resting place short of a predominant navy—which I do not believe there is for a country with outlying dependencies—I think it would be found in the localization of a defensive navy.

So much error mixes itself with this idea as we have seen it put into practice, that a few words become necessary in explanation. The reason why an outlying dependency cannot be held in war except by a predominant navy is that the defence can never assemble locally a force equal or superior to the attacking force; and because the place will not be attacked except by such superior force. The attacking power estimates the force that is established, or may be established, locally in the dependency before the attack is determined on, and the force despatched for the attack will be vastly superior to the local force. If it were possible to locally defend every point liable to attack to such an extent as would convince an adversary that conquest would prove to be a loss to him and not a gain, then, indeed, local defence might prevent attack, though it could not prevent surrender if the attack were made. But the idea of so defending involves generally — perhaps always — a mathematical absurdity. The greater the expenditure of men and money in the defence of any outlying point, so much the greater is the wound inflicted on the defending power by the capture of such point. Nations at war do not expect to always make a profit to themselves out of every combat. They are ready to lose by a conquest if the loss to the adversary is still greater; and the whole power of a nation which has the predominant navy may be judiciously and properly thrown into the attack of one point which is absolutely valueless to the attacking power, if the defence of it will produce exhaustion in the state of the defending power. We had a perfect illustration of this strategical axiom in the case of Sevastopol. There the whole power of England and France was thrown into the attack only because the whole power of Russia was thrown into the local defence, and it was certain that she was gradually

exhausting herself in the effort. Everyone now understands that had Russia evacuated the Crimea the moment the armies of England, France and Turkey landed, she would have done much better for herself than she did by attempting to hold out, and so becoming exhausted in the attempt to do that which is impossible, namely, to defend an outlying position locally.

Russia's exhaustion in this case proceeded from the fact that it was much easier for the allied powers to place a given force in the vicinity of Sevastopol, than it was for Russia to place an equal force to meet it. But because of the freedom of her land communications with Sevastopol, Russia was for a long time able to compete—though only by an exhausting process—in placing force opposite to force as the siege of Sevastopol went on. Had the Crimea been an island, Sevastopol must have collapsed in a week or two, as Santiago did, because there would have been no possibility of throwing in reinforcements to meet those which the allies threw in by sea.

We see, therefore, that it is utterly impossible to defend outlying possessions locally in the way that has hitherto been attempted, namely, by fortifications and garrisons, the strength of which can be estimated before the attack is made. The attack will not be made at all except by forces superior to the garrison, accompanied by appliances calculated as sufficient to subdue the defending works. It is also certain that expenditure, however great, on works and garrisons, will not prevent attack, because that very expenditure will make conquest seem desirable to the enemy. In like manner the localization of ordinary naval force—armored vessels and cruisers—will not be any more useful. The attack will be supported by naval forces of the same kind, but in superior quantity, and this will put such defense out of court.

In England thirty years ago we fell into a double mistake on this head. We imagined that in war our existence as a nation would not be threatened, even though, for want of a predominant navy, we could not keep the war out of our own waters; and, on the understanding that the war would inevitably come into our own waters, we built armored ships without speed or coal supply, as well as considerable numbers of gunboats with very limited locomotive power, each armed with a single armor piercing gun. There was more to be said for the latter coast defenders than for the former; for while the force of the former could be

measured and calculated on, so that a really superior force of the same kind could be prepared and dispatched to meet them, the cost of the one force being proportioned to the other, the only measure of the force of the gunboats was to take it gun for gun. The moment this was done it was seen that, for any given sum, the force of the gunboats was immensely greater than gun for gun in the ordinary ironclad, and that in any case the ordinary ironclad, with her battery of a few heavy guns, was the wrong sort of force to bring against the gunboats.

The fatal flaw, however, in the design of the gunboats was their want of locomotion. Unless they were assembled at the point of the coast attacked when the attack was made, they would be useless to prevent it or to ward it off, because they could not be assembled there in time. The only way to make them effective in defence would be to have them already in swarms at every point liable to attack. But this would have cost as much as to establish and maintain a predominant navy, and practically we have acted on that principle. We maintain the predominant navy, and we have abandoned the idea of coast defence vessels altogether.

Of course, we should be right in any case, even were the system of coast defence by special vessels of any class a sound one for those nations which cannot aspire to maintaining a predominant navy. But it is significant that though France and Russia do not hope for a predominant navy, and must expect that if they go to war with a nation possessing one the fighting will be in their own waters, they seem no longer disposed to add to their coast defence gun-ships and vessels. France, between 1875 and 1891, launched 14 coast defence gun vessels, and Russia, between 1863 and 1895, launched 15 coast defence gun vessels; but they are neither of them building any more.

But France, which has already 211 torpedo boats, is building, including destroyers, 46 more; and Russia, which has already 175 torpedo boats, including 1 destroyer, is building 28 more destroyers.

No one yet knows what these vessels, which are torpedo vessels first and gun vessels afterward, really mean, but it is universally admitted that their chief function is defensive and their chief time for operating is in the hours of darkness. It is not at all impossible that because this class of vessel put in so little appear-

ance on either side during the late war, there may be a tendency, especially in the United States, to discredit it. The question is whether it will be logical to do so. If we go back to a fundamental principle of strategy, we shall note that absence of information as to the amount and nature of the defence operates as a strong preventive of attack; and the very fact that we do not know how complete a real torpedo boat defence may be brings it markedly into line with the fundamental principle. We are certain that, apart from any effect which may have been produced on American naval officers' minds by their recent experience, the thing which is most feared by naval officers is torpedo attack in darkness. Great American commanders have spoken of this fear as one that cannot be contended against, and on all these grounds we arrive at the conclusion that, if it is to be possible for the United States to stop short of aiming at a predominant navy, the defence of her new possessions will be best entrusted to vessels using the torpedo as their weapon, and of a class something near the French sea-going boats. The great powers of locomotion possessed by such vessels removes the flaw which has attended all attempts at coast defense by gunships; the immense numbers that can be produced for comparatively small sums, combining with the dread that, rightly or wrongly, possesses the officers of gunships which are exposed to their attack at night, suggests very strongly that France and Russia are rightly adding to their stock of these vessels. It is not even certain that they may not prove a real defence of outlying possessions when the attack is supported chiefly by heavy gunships. No one can say yet that a swarm of torpedo boats might not destroy a squadron in a night attack, though the cost of the first and its exposure of men was very much less than those of the second. Quite possibly it might be held to be unsafe to anchor a fleet of transports at any point subject to torpedo attack at night. In either of these cases an expedition might actually fail, simply because a true estimate of the power of torpedo defence could not be made.

I think that, if the United States were to adopt this system, they might make their new appendages safer than by any other method short of establishing a predominant navy; but I cannot say I think my suggestion is likely to be adopted. I do not observe that nations generally go very far in the application of the rules of strategy in the classes of ships they choose to build. I

doubt if the United States will prove an exception. If Spain, instead of producing a navy like that of every other nation, only smaller, had spent half the money in crowding Cuban and Puerto Rican harbors with swarms of torpedo boats, it does not seem to me that the United States ships could have displayed the boldness and readiness that they did immediately after war was declared; and I cannot measure what the effect in the United States—or, indeed, all over the world—would have been, had a couple of capital ships succumbed to the attack of a group of torpedo boats. But Spain spent her money in producing a fleet without reference to her strategical position, and simply in imitation of larger navies. The money and men were absolutely wasted, and she would now have been in a better position had she never spent a penny or a man in that way. But I apprehend that the United States will in the end halt between two opinions. She will stop short of producing a predominant navy, but she will not stop short of aiming at one which has no special relation to her strategic position. I cannot but fear for her if ever the results are brought to the test. Therein, with other imaginings, lay my original qualms as I watched her stretching her arms toward Cuba. I trust that time will prove that they were groundless.

P. H. COLOMB.